

THE TOKYO SH

by LCdr. Dan Cheever

Another routine hop to R116. Routine in that the delays and frustrations associated with operating from NAF Atsugi, Japan, had become the norm. It had been a great tour with great people. NAF Atsugi is eight miles inland of Sagami Bay, but surfers shouldn't get too excited, because the beach is at least an hour's drive, and a million people live between the runway and the beach. We brief emergencies and "what-if" scenarios in great detail.

As a senior Dambuster in VFA-195, I had the lead on an AIC hop. We briefed contingencies, including 45-minute delays at the hold-short and the crazy bingo number from the working area.

Nothing in my training or experience in Japan or aboard USS *Independence* (CV 62) could have prepared me for this flight. Everything was uneventful until the rendezvous.

My junior wingman noted that my starboard, main-landing-gear door appeared to be open. "I'll cycle the gear once feet wet and we'll be on our way," I said to myself, overly confident.

With gear down, Dash 2 called, "Nose and left down, right up."

We were about five miles south of the Kanto plain, I was glad I had a full bag of gas to figure out this little problem.



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Photo by LCdr. T. B. Surbridge

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To my astonishment, the emergency procedures did not work. This wasn't my first major emergency, but it was the first time the procedures had failed me.

By now the ready room had a life of its own. The SDO, Ops, Safety, XO and CO were in on the troubleshooting. We were cutting holes in the VFR sky with Mount Fuji to the west, Tokyo to the northwest, and Narita International approach corridor to the south.

We had plenty of airspace, just a lack of workable ideas and a growing anticipation of the eventual trap of a lifetime. My confident inner voice was becoming less confident.

I must have cycled the gear at least 50 times in the hour we spent troubleshooting. We tried dropping the gear with different airloads and G's for good measure. Each time we tried something new, the only thing that changed was the feverish pitch of the ideas coming over the radio.

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A few times during the excitement, I turned base down to gather my composure and talk to the controllers. They were graciously keeping everyone out of my way as I flew over the dark blue Pacific Ocean. I'd always figured aircrew coordination was something multi-place aircraft did, not Hornet guys. That fact was evident in our handling of communication and procedures. What I know now, I wish I knew then! I was doing the Tokyo shuffle.


After numerous attempts, the gear finally broke through what turned out to be interlocked gear doors (a nut had been left unattached to the inboard gear door). The door swung on the one good attachment and caught the outboard door neatly enough to interlock.

We had finally rolled the aircraft right and then snap-rolled left while lowering the gear handle. The rolling probably had nothing to do with it, but we were desperate at that point.

As I rolled out, the remaining metal from the gear door harmlessly fell to the pavement. Lucky for the government and me, the metal landed on the runway and not on any houses.

It turned out that one of our best sailors and CDIs had not properly replaced the nut or noticed it was missing. I've never seen a more apologetic look in my life than I saw that day.

Since then, I've been to safety school, received ORM training and crew-coordination training. We are making good progress in educating pilots, aircrew, and maintainers about aviation hazards. Any maintenance on a good jet can lead to unexpected problems. That's why cannibalization is one of the top 10 safety concerns.

Finally, the great Winston Churchill said it best when he said "Never, never, never, never give up..." 

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